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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000006

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SEIDNAYA PRISON TROUBLES BOIL OVER AGAIN

REF: A. DAMASCUS 00482

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 00517

[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 00884

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Muhanad al-Hasani (strictly protect), a human rights lawyer and president of the Syrian Organization for Human Rights (SWASIAH) told us of two new violent events at Seidnaya prison. On December 27 violence between inmates and Syrian soldiers resulted in approximately 50 deaths, and a fire -- cause unknown -- broke out inside the prison on December 31, seriously damaging an interior wall. Al-Hasani explained that the image of Seidnaya as a repository for hardened terrorists was largely a SARG fabrication meant to gull local and Western observers into believing the SARG is a bulwark against violent, Islamic fundamentalism. END SUMMARY.

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Two New Events  
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[1](#)2. (C) Al-Hasani, a prominent human rights lawyer who counts many of the Damascus Declaration National Council members among his client base, reported January 2 that security contacts inside Seidnaya had claimed prisoners and Syrian soldiers clashed on the morning of December 27, resulting in approximately 50 inmate fatalities. A military officer had allegedly entered a "room" in the prison with a group of soldiers and threatened to shoot the prisoners gathered there. Al-Hasani stated he did not know why the threat was made but according to his source the threat was meant simply to scare the inmates. The inmates were apparently scared enough, and took the threat seriously enough, that they responded by rushing the soldiers. In the ensuing melee, soldiers fired rounds at the crowd, killing roughly 50 inmates. Al-Hasani did not have any information on military casualties or the number injured.

[1](#)3. (C) SWASIAH sources in the area of the prison reported to al-Hasani that a new fire appeared to have broken out on December 31, destroying part of a wall of a building inside the prison. Al-Hasani also observed that the military presence in and around the prison had increased since the events of December 6 (ref C), including tanks. How much of this increase stemmed from the December 27 and 31 incidents particularly is unknown.

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From the Rumor Mill  
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[1](#)4. (C) Beginning with the riots of July 5 (ref A), human rights observers and a number of our like-minded diplomatic colleagues increasingly believe that the numbers of Seidnaya

prisoners killed in clashes with guards and soldiers may be larger than originally expected. The SARG, however, has kept all information on the prison under a tight lid. No local press outlets have covered any Seidnaya incidents since their initial coverage of the July 5 riots. Al-Hasani reported that a "big rumor" about security forces shuffling Seidnaya inmates to other prisons in the country had begun to circulate. He believed this might be a SARG tactic to confuse perceptions on actual number of individuals held in Seidnaya prison. By preventing any unwanted observers from ascertaining the actual prison population, so the rumor goes, it would be more difficult to determine the actual number of fatalities over the six months. Al-Hasani estimated the current prison population to be between 5,000 and 6,000. As we reported in the past (ref B), moderate Sunni Sheikh Saleh Kuftaro (strictly protect) put the number at 4,000.

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Terrorism and SARG Prestidigitation  
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15. (C) Throughout the meeting, Al-Hasani was at pains to correct what he felt were Western misconceptions about Islamist terrorists in Seidnaya prison. "We can count on two hands the number of real terrorists in Seidnaya," al-Hasani said. He argued that in the past, the SARG had made a public display of arresting low-level Islamists as part of a sleight-of-hand illusion where "one hand works out of sight while the other is in view and empty." Trumpeting an Islamist population in Seidnaya was the SARG's "attempt to show Syrians and the West that they (SARG) are fighting Islamic extremism." Yet behind the scenes, the SARG

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"security services and Palestinian groups have a cooperative agreement to train fighters in Syria and Lebanon." He named Fatah al-Islam (FAI) leader Abu Khalid al-Amleh and Nayef Hawatmeh (aka Abu an-Nuf), the General Secretary of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), as two prominent Palestinian politicians living in Damascus and cooperating with the SARG security forces to train fighters. From these training camps, he claimed, the SARG exerts power over Lebanon. The SARG's paramilitary proxies, he contended, gave it the same leverage with the GOL as it had before withdrawing its military from the country in 2005.

16. (C) COMMENT: Ongoing violence inside Seidnaya prison, coupled with the steady increase in the Syrian military presence at the prison, begs the question of whether prison officials have meaningful control over the prison population, and whether the SARG ever actually re-established control following the initial July 5, 2008 riots. Many contacts tell us the SARG's current response is relatively "constrained" in comparison to the heavy-handed, high fatality crackdown on prison uprisings in the 1980s. In fact, some sources suggest that the government's inability to establish control over Seidnaya has made it appear weak. At the same time, others argue the SARG wants to avoid focusing international media and government attention on human rights abuses at a time when relations with the west are improving. However great an actual threat the prisoners are at the time of their incarceration, it is most probable that the experience inside Seidnaya pushes the prisoners toward ever increasingly extremist positions, making them more vulnerable to recruitment by Islamic extremists.

17. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Rumors of terrorist training camps in Syria abound, but we have yet to be able to locate and identify such camps. From our perspective, al-Hasani's claim that FAI and DFLP fighters trained in Syria provide the SARG leverage equal to what it enjoyed during its occupation of Lebanon seems to be an overstatement of dubious credibility.  
END COMMENT.  
CONNELLY